



**1<sup>st</sup> Lt. William A. Watson, U.S. Army**

## THE PRINTS

“I promise Dad.” Those were the words that I spoke to my father as we smoked our last cigarette and stared at the setting sun in May 1996. We were sharing what would be our last day together before he passed away from the cancers that racked his body. “I promise Dad, I’ll try to return the prints.” What I said that day took 53 years to complete from when it began in World War II, I was left to help a dying man correct a mistake he had done so many years ago.

I was born in 1950, the second of three children born to Bill and Jackie Watson. When I was 10 years old my parents had a bitter divorce that left me without a full-time father and a life of self direction. I was to see my father on “occasions” with a few short phone calls each year. It would become many years before we started to repair the damage and become friends again.

It was not until I went to the funeral of my Dad’s second wife, Mary, in December 1994 that my Dad began to tell me what he did during the war. He told me of some prints that he had won in a dice game coming back from the war on a troop ship. It seemed they may have some value and he wanted to pass them on to his children after he died. Each print had a small oval embossed seal in the lower right hand corner that read, ‘Städtisches Museum Leipzig.’ It did not help to fully understand what it meant, not knowing the German language. My Dad also showed me photos, postcards, silver pieces, coins stamps

and figurines that he picked up during the war. He said, "All of these will be up to you children to divide when I pass on."

It was that day, near the end of my Dad's struggle with cancer, that he looked at me and said, "You remember those prints? I didn't win them in a dice game, I took them. If you think they are worth something try to sell them. If not try and return them to where they came from. Promise?"

My Dad passed away on August 7, 1996 in Denver, CO after being ill for a long time.

A month later I met my brother and sister in Sierra Vista, AZ for my father's Veterans of Foreign Wars funeral ceremony. Afterwards we sat in a motel room and split my Dad's few possessions as he requested. I received a few stamps, coins, silver, war photos, postcards and four prints. These four prints would consume my life for the next two years as I tried to keep a promise to my father.

As it turned out these were not prints but originals. Each one had a small half-inch embossed seal in the lower right corner that translated into 'The Municipal Museum of Leipzig.' Each was a pencil drawing of bridges, buildings or churches in the local area of Germany. Each one was signed by the artist. Some were titled, numbered and dated.

I tried to find information on the individual artists and history of the area around Leipzig. I looked for reference material from the local libraries, online information services, and government agencies. I was not having any luck with my request for information or history of these times. I sent an e-mail to an individual I found on the Internet, who lived in Leipzig and requested an address of the local museum to see if this might shed light on the prints that I had in my possession. He told me to write down all that I knew about the prints and send photos to the Museum der Bildenden Künste (Museum of Pictorial Arts) in Leipzig, Germany.

I received back a letter from Dr. Herwig Guratzsch, the Director of the museum. He stunned me when his reply indicated that the four prints I had mentioned were in fact restored, as was most of the museums' art in the Castle Püchau during the war and taken away by American troops in 1945. He indicated that the group of missing prints is essentially larger and that soldiers and the local people have taken much of the art for their personal use. He asked if my father found them in local houses or if he ever spoke of the Castle Püchau. This castle had become the temporary home of the contents of the



**Castle Püchau outside Leipzig.**

Municipal Museum of Leipzig and other cultural displays of the city that was bombed very heavily by the Army Air Corp. on December 4, 1943.

Dr. Guratzsch's museum records were very accurate. The records listed each print by artist's name, print's title, date the museum acquired it, the museum's inventory number, and the annotation in 1945 that it was taken by American troops. He also mentioned that the prints did not have any great value in the art market. He was very happy to hear that I wanted to return them as they were part of the history of the museum and now had become part of the history of my family.

My Dad wrote to Sotheby's Auction House in New York, in March 1991 requesting their opinion on how he could dispose of the prints. Should he return the prints to the Leipzig Museum or capitalize on whatever value they might have? Sothebys wrote back in April 1991 that these prints would not bring enough at auction to warrant this method of sale and recommended contacting a local print dealer or art gallery.

These prints were identified as:



**1. Roland Anheisser (1877-1949): *Basil*, Inventory # I. 2039. 1<sup>st</sup> displayed December 1911. Taken by American troops in 1945. Returned 1998.**



2. Alfred Frank (1884-1945): *Brügge*, Inventory # NI. 6460. 1<sup>st</sup> displayed May 1930. Taken by American troops in 1945. Returned 1998.



3. Hermann Hirzel (1864-?) : *Die Brücke*, Inventory # 2659. 1<sup>st</sup> displayed January 1926. Taken by American troops in 1945. This print was destroyed by being made into a decoupage. I was granted permission to keep it.

4. Rudi Hammer (1882-?): *Kölner Dom*, Inventory #NI 6562. 1<sup>st</sup> displayed July 1931. Taken by American troops 1945. Returned 1998. (Too large to copy)

I wanted to return the prints right away but I also wanted to learn the history that surrounded the prints so I could try to understand why and how they entered our lives.

I came up empty on my research after reading volumes of literature concerning the war. I had spent many hours looking at records from the National Archives and the history of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFA and A), section of the Office of Military Government of Germany (OMGUS). The stories of plunder, looting and greed by members of the military, art dealers and individuals during the war were incredible. All this research yielded nothing on the history of the prints, the Museum of Leipzig or the Castle Püchau.

My break came this past summer when my sister found my Dad's war time diary while going through some of his old papers. This turned out to be the key I was looking for, a first hand account in his words. I looked at my father's diary many times to try to figure out what he was thinking and if he had access to the art and treasures that was stored at the Castle Püchau. This small green and tattered book that only covered the last months of the war spoke to me about the past and helped me recreate the history that has eluded me for almost 2 years.

This is a recreated war story of my father, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. William A. Watson, during the end of World War II and Company "B" of the 369<sup>th</sup> Medical Battalion, under the command of Capt. James W. Williams, part of the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the United States Army. Its' duty was to tend to the wounded and to evacuate casualties from forward aid stations, saving untold lives. My Dad's company arrived on European shores in January 1945 and over the next 4 months marched to the Elbe River in Germany to meet up with the Russians. This union would mark the end of the war with Germany on May 8, 1945.

The spoils of war go the victors and along the way my Dad's company would acquire, requisition, or take "war trophies" to help ease the conditions of war, weather or greed. It was very common to seek shelter in a home or a barn to escape the bullets or relief from the cold. The soldiers would take anything along the way from weapons, medals, gold, jewelry, and including food or booze. To escape the pressure of war many soldiers would pay children with chocolate and cigarettes to bring them schnapps or whiskey as older adults would trade anything of value for food, sugar or dry goods. Near the end of the war my Dad's company arrived outside of Leipzig, Germany and on April 21 entered the Castle Püchau compound formerly occupied by the von Hohenthal family.

My Dad's diary completed the story when he wrote about the final two weeks of the war with the following inscriptions:

April 21, 1945: "Moved to Püchau, quartered in medieval castle of Von Hohenthal. What a lay out! First hot bath in a hell of a long time - Mail coming in - no action. What a welcomed rest. Supposed to contact Russians today - still sweating them out."

April 22, 1945: "Same place. No activity. Went up on ramparts tonight and watched our artillery pound the hell out of Eilenburg, GR. White flags were hung out twice."

April 25, 1945: "Quiet - still at Hohenthal. Russians are really slow getting here. Letter from my girl. John Frick visited scene where 70 Poles & Russians were herded into a barn and barn set on fire, those

that ran out were shot - May go myself tomorrow - S.S. Troopers - typical."

April 26, 1945: "Went to the slave labor camp today- never will I forget the sight. The camp was near Taucha and was called the Tekla Compound. At last Ivan has made contact, not in force though."

April 28, 1945: "69<sup>th</sup> got hell for taking Leipzig and meeting Russians ahead of schedule- Time-Life and brass had meeting planned. Radio tells of Germany's offer of unconditional surrender to U.S. and Britain. Celebrated anyway, got nice buzz on. Three letters from Jackie."

May 2, 1945: "Moved to Grosbothen - news of Hitler's death last night."

May 7, 1945: "It's over!! V-E day at last. Corks are popping, 00:41 - 7 May 1945."

(V-E Day, Victory in Europe, is officially observed on May 8.)

Now that I have found answers to the mystery of the prints, I am sending them home to where they belong. Dr. Guratzsch, Director of the Museum der Bildenden Künste in Leipzig, promised to publish a notice of thanks in their daily newspaper for returning the prints and taking the time to rediscover the history and secrets surrounding them.

I started out to keep a promise to my father and in the process I have been touched by the differences of two cultures. I have been changed forever by the process of repatriating the prints back to the German people and to them I say danke schön. I hope they accept my father's postponed apology. More than anything, now that I finally completed my promise, I wish my Dad was here to share it with me.

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**William A. Watson**  
**Jan. 10, 1919 - Aug. 7, 1996**

Notes on related subjects:

Alford, Kenneth D. *The Spoils of World War II: the American military's role in stealing Europe's treasures*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994.

Feliciano, Hector *The Lost Museum: the Nazi conspiracy to steal the world's greatest works of art*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1997.

Nicholas, Lynn H. *The rape of Europa: the fate of Europe's treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. New York: Random House, 1994.

Letters from Dr. Herwig Guratzsch, Director of the Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig, Germany. Dated 1-10-1997 and 11-14-1997.